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ABSTRACT

Although Wisconsin citizens support public education, they have significant doubts about the quality of education in the state and would support a number of reforms aimed at changing its structure, character, and accountability. Three telephone surveys were conducted with three representative samples of 1,000 citizens between January 1988 and January 1989. A few of the same questions were asked in all three surveys, but each survey's focus varied slightly based on information obtained from an earlier survey or focus groups that were conducted prior to each wave of interviewing. The following general findings are discussed: (1) statewide, most citizens do not believe that the quality of education is excellent or that students today receive as good an education as they did, and in Milwaukee, 72 percent of the residents view the quality of education as poor; (2) most respondents believe that teachers and administrators should be accountable for the quality of education, and urban, poor, and minority respondents strongly support a voucher system that would allow parents to choose their child's school; (3) special education programs are strongly supported, but there is disagreement between the elderly and blacks, urban residents, younger people, and women over child care programs; (4) while 33 percent of the respondents felt that too little was spent on public education, approximately half opposed higher taxes in their communities and would prefer to shift the tax burden to the state. Statistical data are included on 14 graphs. (FMW)

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Wisconsin

Policy Research Institute Report

April 1989 Volume 2, No. 4

THE LACK OF CONFIDENCE IN PUBLIC EDUCATION IN WISCONSIN

A Survey of How 3,000 Wisconsin Residents View Public Education in Wisconsin

UD 027 233

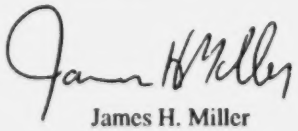
Report from the Executive Director:

One of the advantages of doing semi-annual polling is that over a period of time you produce data that begins to form a trend line of how the public views specific issues. Three times over a 12-month period, between January of 1988 and January 1989, the Wisconsin Policy Research Institute interviewed 3,000 Wisconsin residents selected at random for three major public opinion surveys.

In all three of these surveys there were extensive questions asked on how Wisconsin residents viewed public education in the state. The results indicated much less enthusiasm for public education than one might have thought.

While some members of the public education establishment will differ with some of the conclusions from our data, if one takes an overview of American public education, the results in Wisconsin are easily understood. For the last several years the American public has been told in survey after survey that our public elementary and secondary schools simply do not measure up to education in the rest of the Western world. One of the things that is apparent is that these kinds of surveys are finally beginning to have an impact on how Americans in general, and Wisconsin residents in particular view the public education effort.

While residents in Wisconsin still view public education in a positive light, it is certainly not with the same enthusiasm as one probably would have found a generation ago. What our data tells us is that the public in Wisconsin is ready for some serious restructuring of how schools are currently run and view the issues of Accountability and Choice as ways of improving their schools. Those who question the results from our data ought to be aware that last December the legislative auditor of the State of Minnesota issued a report on the quality of public high schools in Minnesota, and much of their data in terms of how the public viewed education in Minnesota was very similar to the results we have found in Wisconsin. Our results are not different from the data that is now being reported around the country. We believe that the data should be used as a guiding hand in determining the direction of public education in Wisconsin as we enter the 21st century.



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THE LACK OF CONFIDENCE IN PUBLIC EDUCATION IN WISCONSIN

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THE LACK OF CONFIDENCE

IN PUBLIC EDUCATION IN WISCONSIN

A Survey of How 3,000 Wisconsin Residents
View Public Education in Wisconsin

by Gordon S. Black, Ph. D.

I. INTRODUCTION:

America has long prided itself on the universality and quality of its primary and secondary education system. Public schools were an innovation of the United States. Prior to the creation of freely available public schools in the 19th century, education was considered the private domain of the upper classes throughout the world. Education was restricted precisely because those in power assumed, quite correctly, that universal education would contribute to an undermining of their authority.

America, by contrast, is rooted in a three-hundred-year-old tradition of revolt against aristocracy, plutocracy, and theocracy. The democratic underpinnings of America were already well established at the time of the Revolution; these underpinnings are part of an ideology which argues the equality of opportunity for all citizens. Protestant immigrants, in particular, already practiced universal and public education as early as the beginning of the 17th century, and limited schooling was expected of most children in many of the New England communities.

Although the American public education system was **never** equally available to all citizens, America educated more of its children during the 19th and first part of the 20th centuries than any other country in the world. For nearly a hundred years, our "land grant" colleges graduated more students than all of the European colleges combined.

The American commitment to universally available public education has had a profound impact on the United States in the past. Education fueled our innovation and expansion during the industrial revolution. Education contributed to the increasing productivity of our workforce. Education supported the continuing expansion of our democracy, providing the foundation of understanding and support for our institutions. Education, when denied, was a tool to keep minorities submerged in economic poverty, just a small step away from outright slavery.

The Educational Basis of American Decline:

America emerged from World War 11 as the dominant power in the world. In many areas, our dominance was so complete that we became complacent about our assumed superiority. As late as 1960,

less than two decades ago, our economic system was the envy of the world and our educational system second to none.

The Russian thrust into space shocked that complacency. Americans very suddenly faced the reality that an underdeveloped country such as the Soviet Union could, with a massive commitment, produce more scientists, engineers, and mathematicians than the United States. The aftermath of Sputnik was a major increase in Federal spending aimed at increasing the attractiveness and opportunities in these fields critical to our competitiveness with the Soviets.

The real threat, however, was not the Soviets. On the other side of the world the Japanese were instituting a system of universal public education somewhat imitative of the American system. And in Europe, virtually every country extended the opportunity for education to the entire population, ending the exclusivity of higher education.

In the 1980's, the American educational system is no longer the envy of other countries. Our students fare the worst in every cross-national examination of the industrialized countries. Our business leaders complain bitterly of the huge costs they face in trying to educate students who graduate from high school functionally illiterate. Our high school dropout rates have soared as drugs have penetrated lower and lower into our schools, creating a group of students with seriously impaired learning capabilities. Our families have been disintegrating at an increasing rate, creating a world without parents or a world in which "children" give birth to children.

For a variety of reasons, the American educational establishment is failing to educate students to a level of achievement that meets the needs of our economic system or is competitive with the success of the educational systems of other countries.

This failure is widely recognized by the experts on education, but the general public is also demonstrating an increasing concern about the problem across the United States. The chorus of criticism of the educational establishment in the United States is increasing, and much of the public response of the educational establishment has been defensive. Next to national defense and public safety, education is the single most important area of public policy to the average citizen, and the average citizen is increasingly worried that children

are not acquiring the level of educational achievement they need to succeed in the world of the future.

The Problem of Wisconsin:

During the past 18 months, the **Wisconsin Policy Research Institute** has sponsored three state-wide surveys on the issue of public education. In total, three representative samples of 1000 residents have been taken, for a total of over 3000 interviews. Each of these samples was randomly selected and interviewed by telephone. The interviews were conducted in January 1988, September 1988, and January 1989. A few of the questions were asked in all three surveys, but a majority of the questions were asked only once or twice. In each survey, the focus of interest was slightly different, depending in part on information obtained from an earlier survey or focus groups that were conducted prior to each wave of interviewing.

Combined together, these surveys provide an extensive profile of how the general public in Wisconsin views its educational establishment and educational system. The picture is by no means an entirely happy view.

Although widespread support for public education remains, the public has significant doubts about the quality of education in Wisconsin. These same citizens would support a number of reforms aimed at changing the structure, character, and accountability of the primary and secondary educational systems.

These reforms, which involve both greater school accountability and greater choice for parents, have been widely and vigorously opposed by the educational establishments in other areas of the country, and the public commentary of some school administrators in Wisconsin has been similarly negative.

In the City of Milwaukee, in particular, there is sharp discontinuity between the education that is being offered and the education that parents and citizens want. Dissatisfaction with public education runs deepest in Milwaukee, but accountability is desired throughout every part of Wisconsin.
Wisconsin appears to have a problem with its public education, and is by no means alone with this problem. Wisconsin is not the worst

place for public education by most standards; but the problem is real, and defensiveness by public officials will not reassure the public.

The Issue is Excellence and Equality:

In a world of little or no public education, a universally available education of mediocre or marginal quality might be competitively advantageous. In a world striving strenuously for **excellence** in education, the only competitive standard is at least **equal excellence**. If we accept being 15th or 20th in education, we will eventually accept being 15th or 20th in our standard of living and our status in the world.

Our business leaders are faced today with the reality that if they don't compete successfully, they will simply die. The threat from overseas is real, and is reflected in $100 Billion dollar trade deficits. In order to compete, our workers must be competitive with their European and Japanese counterparts. If we are not competitive educationally, our businesses and industries will simply fall further and further behind.

The educational establishment is a player who must join the "game of excellence." Complacency on the issue of quality is the same as giving up the contest altogether; it amounts to a theft of opportunity from the generation who cannot compete successfully. Mediocre is most certainly not "good enough;" but even "good" is not "good enough." In the view of Wisconsin residents, being just "good" amounts to falling short of the goal -- failing as it were.

The problem of the City of Milwaukee's educational system is the problem of equality. The Milwaukee public schools must, like urban school systems everywhere, tackle the problem of educating the children who are the most difficult to educate. If Milwaukee residents are right, the city of Milwaukee is falling way short of even the standard of "good."

When we permit an urban school system to "fail," we are accepting the standard of second class opportunity and second class citizenship for an entire segment of our population -- the less affluent, Black, Hispanic, and disadvantaged.

Milwaukee residents are unhappy! They want more than they get from their educational system. Most of all, they want equality, real educational equality, and not some abstract concept.

The Issue of Responding to the Public:

Each of these studies has been made public earlier, and in each instance the outcry of some educators could be heard loudly across the state. It was as if the research had somehow pointed out that the "emperor had no clothes." These studies were conducted to provide a view of how the public feels. **If the public feels negatively about aspects of public education, one would think that something is failing.** Either the education lacks something that the public wants or the educators have failed to explain why and how the education excels.

Everyone in the state "consumes" the product of public education in one way or another. In this competitive world, the successful companies are the ones who "listen closely" to their customers. The Japanese are in the process of outstripping the Americans precisely because they listen more closely to their customers.

So far, we have little evidence that educators are listening to their customers at all. Even if one finds some aspects of this research objectionable, one would expect that educational administrators would want these data on how the public feels. **To date, we have not received a single request for clarification or explanation of any of the tindings by any of the leading educators across the State.** Perhaps this lack of interest, and the well expressed defensiveness, says more about the educational establishment than the published polling results themselves.

This report is a composite of the findings from three separate studies of public attitudes toward education in Wisconsin. Taken together, the results point to an electorate which views its educational system as adequate, but hardly exceptional. Specifically, the residents of Wisconsin want particular improvements in the educational system:

- They want accountability, where accountability implies that teachers and administrators are held responsible for the educational performance of children.

- They want excellence; where each child is sufficiently important that they are educated to the highest level they are capable of attaining.

- They want increasing competitiveness and choice; because they believe that choice and competitiveness will "force" the schools to improve the educational services they provide.

- They are willing to pay for quality education; but they want to buy quality, and not mediocrity.

In the real world of institutions, the public does not always get what it wants. The educational establishment serves many interests; the public is only one of them, and perhaps not the most important. At the same time, these results may force greater consideration of the concerns that Wisconsin residents have about their educational system.

II. EXCELLENCE IS NOT WHAT WISCONSIN RESIDENTS SEE

The Overall View of Quality:

If one asks any ordinary parent what quality of education they want for their children, they will tell you that they would like their children to have an **excellent** education; not just **good**, and certainly not **fair** or **poor**, but **excellent**!

When we ask a sample of Wisconsin adults to rate the education children obtain in the state, the answer is **good**, with only one in four rating the Wisconsin educational system as excellent.

State-wide, 46% rate the educational system as **good**, with 24% describing public education as **excellent**.

However, one in four, or 27%, rate the quality of education as **fair** or **poor**.

The question here is what such answers mean from a practical standpoint. With ratings such as these, does Wisconsin have a problem or not? Again, the meaning of the answers depends in part on the standard of performance one demands from the institution. In

an earlier era, **good** might have been acceptable, and it may well be acceptable today for some people; but many of our standards of performance have been turned inside out over the past 20 years, and our standards can no longer remain the same.

The answer is that Wisconsin does indeed have a problem, if **excellence** is that standard we expect from most of our schools. The Wisconsin public does not see excellence.

Milwaukee Has a Problem by Any Standard:

Milwaukee's educational system is clearly a system that is in trouble. That theme has been present in every one of our reports, and it will be reiterated here.

- In Milwaukee, 72% of the residents view the system as only **fair** or **poor**, contrasted to 27% statewide.

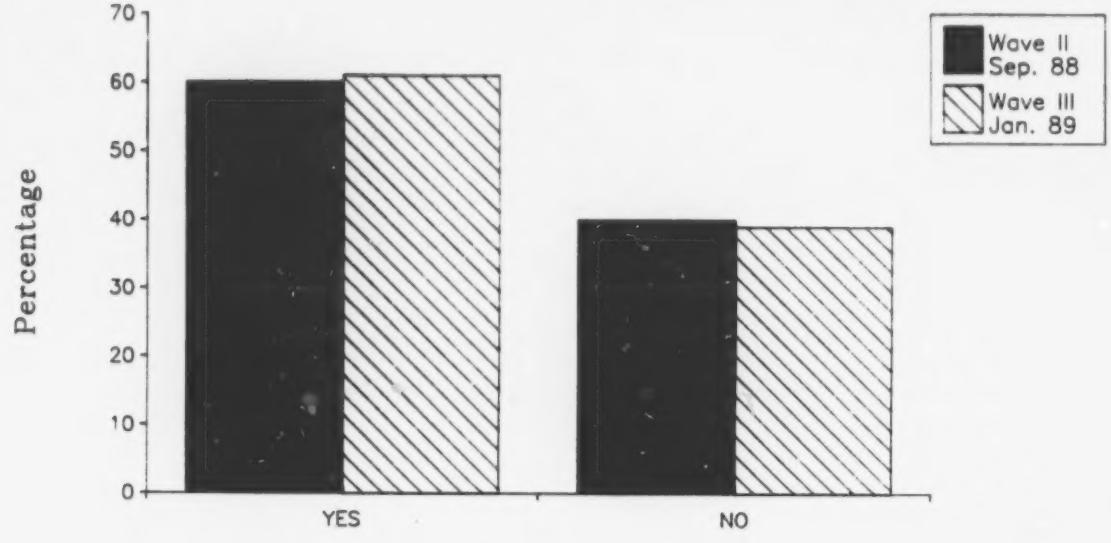
- More dramatically, in Madison only 9% rate local education as only **fair** or **poor**, indicating that substantially higher ratings are possible.

As a city's school system goes, so goes the city. The perceived quality of education is, next to price, the single most important factor in selecting a place to live for families with children in school. A school system which is perceived as inferior will drive away the middle class faster than anything except violent crime.

What is happening in Milwaukee is a replay of one of the most common of urban stories in contemporary America. As school age increases, and facilities deteriorate, the middle class leaves. The flight of the middle class depresses housing values in relation to the suburbs, which further attracts the poor. In the end, the poor are concentrated in a central city which is itself beset with declining property values and tax revenues, even while the demands on the city's resources are growing. The concentration of poor, often Black or Hispanic, reinforces the view that the schools must be poor, and the cycle continues.

The problems of the Milwaukee educational system, as seen by area residents, is a theme which is constant throughout all of this research.

HAVE CHILDREN WHO WENT TO PUBLIC SCHOOLS



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The Specifics of the Ratings:

The burden of this analysis does not rest with a single question, nor is the complexity of attitudes captured with a single point of information. The troubling view of Wisconsin education is supported by other questions, and some questions express optimism about the future. Perhaps the single most damaging question is what parents would do if they did not have to pay extra for private or parochial schools.

- State-wide, only 48% of the people would send their children to public school, with an equal number who would choose private or parochial schools.

- In Milwaukee, only 24% would choose the public schools.

Clearly, something is wrong. Where the public schools are rated very highly, as in Madison, most (73%) would choose the public schools. As the perceived quality of education declines, the desire for some other alternative increases.

Any private company which performed at this level would fast go out of business. If General Motors found that three out of four of their car owners would buy another brand if they could, they would be on their way to oblivion. **Only a near monopoly can survive such a negative demand. For most people, what choice do they have realistically?** The poor have little or no choice; the middle class flees behind legal barriers of suburban boundaries; and the affluent select private or parochial alternatives.

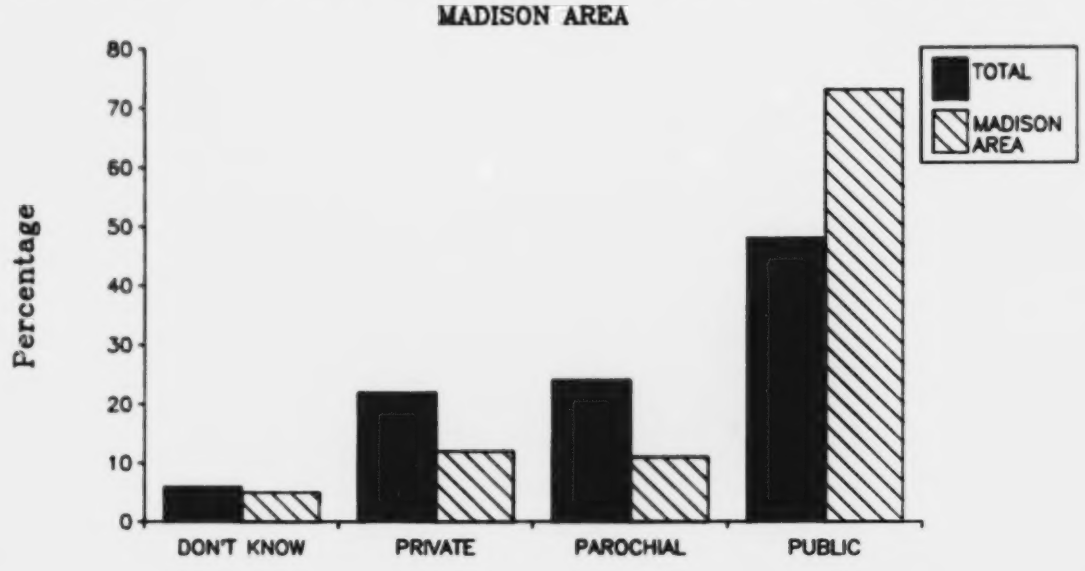
This negative view of the school systems are supported by several other questions that were asked in all three surveys:

- By a margin of 47% to 45%, respondents believe that they received a **better education** in elementary and secondary school than do students today.

- Overall, 34% believe that their own education was better than that of their children, as contrasted to 26% who view their own education as worse.

In each of two surveys in which these questions were asked, the residents of the City of Milwaukee responded distinctly more

WISCONSIN RESIDENTS WOULD CHOOSE PRIVATE SCHOOLS



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negatively than the rest of the state. For example, 56% of the Milwaukee residents and 50% of the Blacks feel that they had a better education than their own children. For these people, public education has deteriorated, and deteriorated badly.

What is Behind These Negative Views:

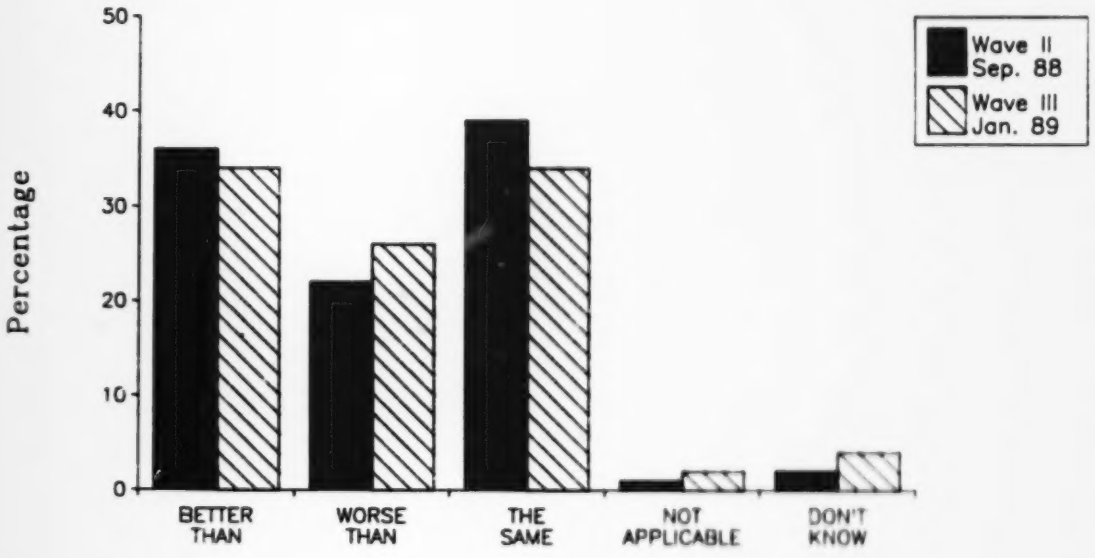
Our surveys have at various points touched on some of the elements that parents and the general public feel are involved in the problems of education. Some specifics include:

- 73% of the people want the goal of education to be to educate each student to his or her highest potential; but only 25% feel that this really is the goal.
- 61% believe that education is aimed primarily at achieving a minimal standard of performance for all students, as opposed to reaching their full potential.
- 58% see the discipline in the schools as "too lenient", with 71% in Milwaukee sharing this view.
- 46% see the number of dropouts increasing, with 67% of those in Milwaukee holding this position; 44% see dropouts as decreasing or staying the same.
- 73% of the residents believe that some or many students graduate with unacceptably poor skills in reading and writing; 82% in Milwaukee hold this view.
- Although respondents are most inclined to blame parents for the dropout problem, over 75% believe that teachers and administrators share some or much of the blame for the reading and writing deficiencies.

All of these findings point to a pattern of mediocrity, as perceived by parents and the general public. The respondents see the educational system:

- As aiming toward minimal standards, rather than real achievement.

YOUR EDUCATION COMPARED TO CHILDRENS'



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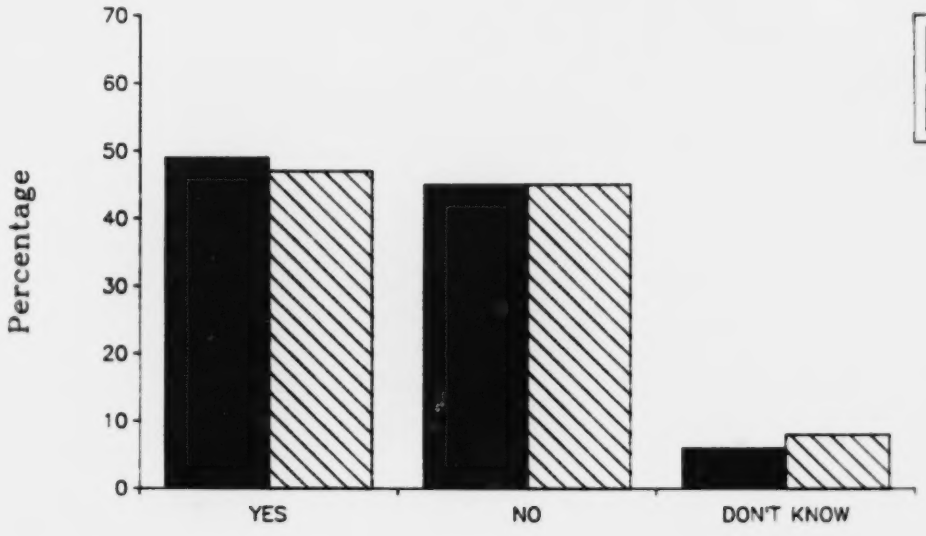
RECEIVED A BETTER EDUCATION THAN STUDENTS DO TODAY



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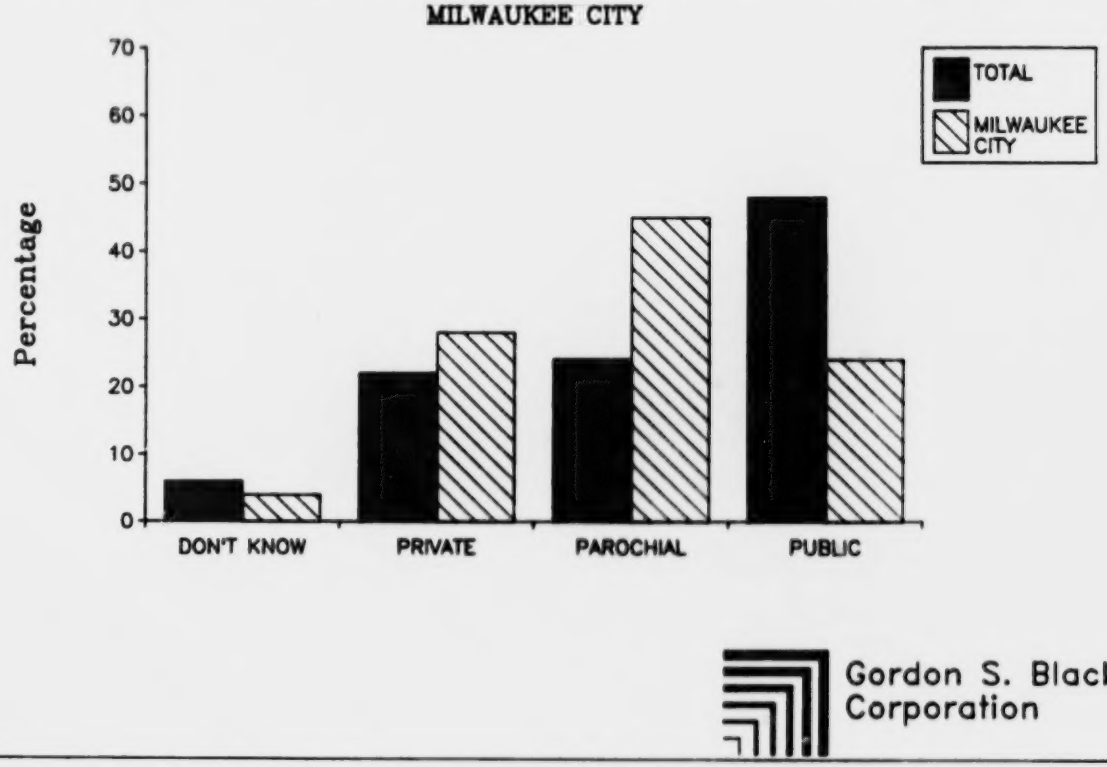
WISCONSIN RESIDENTS WOULD CHOOSE PRIVATE SCHOOLS



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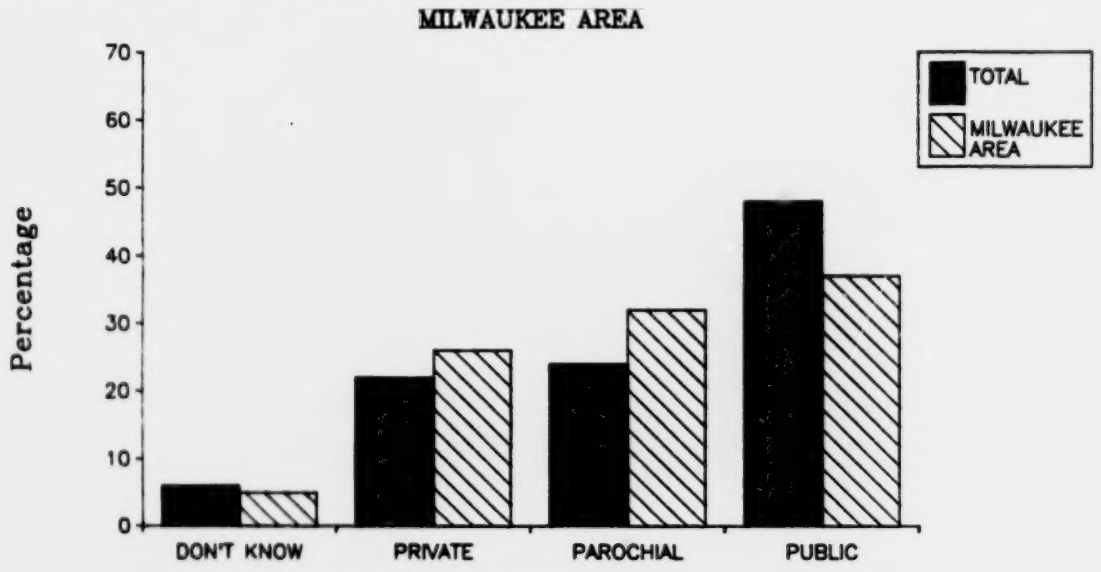
WISCONSIN RESIDENTS WOULD CHOOSE PRIVATE SCHOOLS



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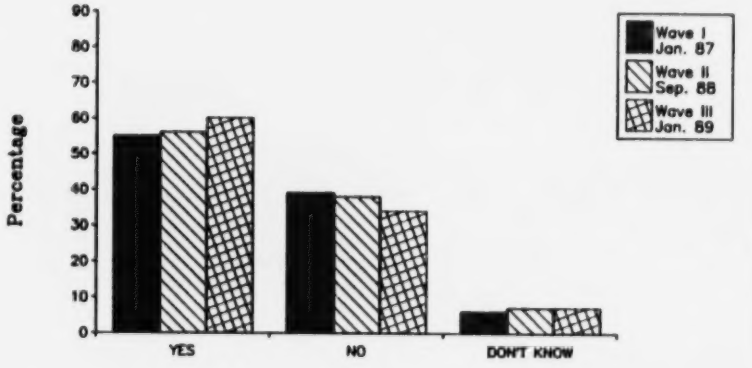
COMPETITION WOULD IMPROVE EDUCATION



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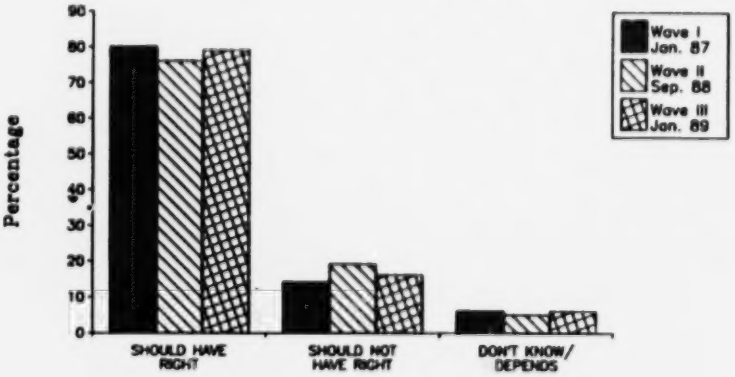
PARENT'S RIGHT TO CHOOSE SCHOOLS



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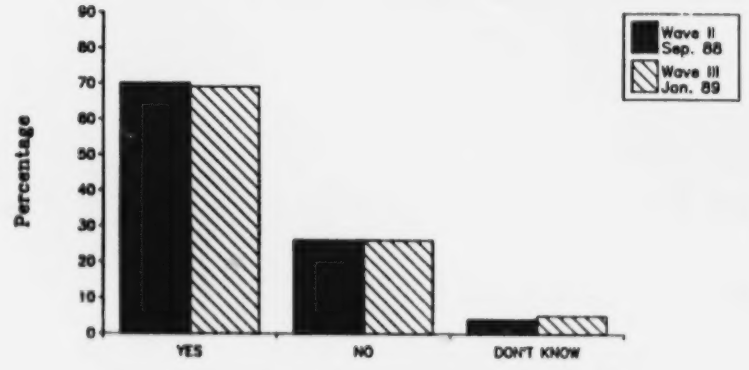
PARENTS SHOULD BE ABLE TO SEND CHILD TO ANOTHER DISTRICT



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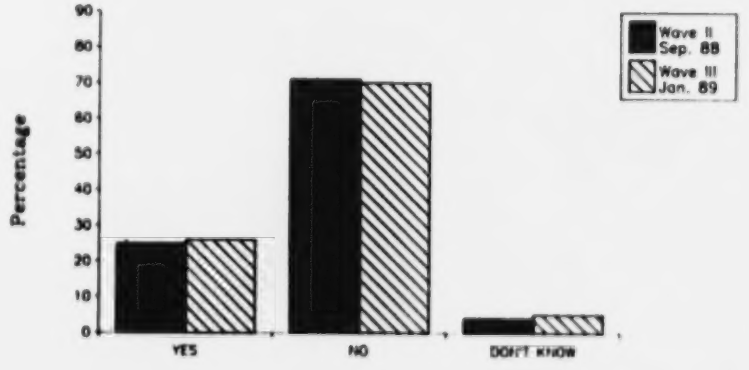
PARENTS HAVE RIGHT TO CHOOSE CHILD'S TEACHERS



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- As tolerating conditions of poor discipline and poor performance in their educational mission, particularly where basic reading and writing skills are concerned.

Although the problems are decidedly more severe in Milwaukee, the problems occur across the state in varying degrees. Public education in Wisconsin is in trouble. The best average ratings are **good** at a time when this standard is no longer acceptable. At its worst, as in Milwaukee, the views of the public are so negative as to threaten the long term stability of the community.

The point here is simple. Either public education is in serious difficulty and the public recognizes the problems, or public education would seem to have gone out of its way to convey the wrong impression to the electorate. Something, however, is decidedly wrong, and public education in Wisconsin is not measuring up to the standards the public holds for the education of their children.

III. WHAT DOES THE PUBLIC WANT? ACCOUNTABILITY AND CHOICE!

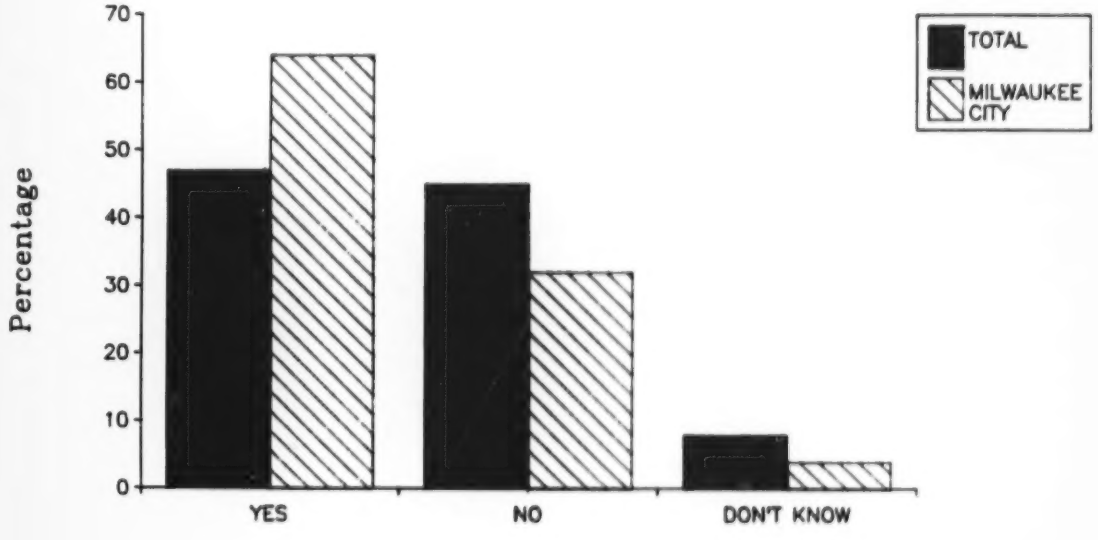
Many of the questions on our surveys focused on the issue of what the public wanted in education, and why. Some of these questions were controversial. In one instance, we specifically changed a question wording because it was attacked in print by a newspaper, and the next two waves (with different wording) produced essentially the same results. If we had to boil all of this down, the public wants two things -- accountability and choice.

Accountability is Really Who is Responsible:

Accountability comes in the form of having teachers and administrators alike held responsible for the quality of education they provide to students. Accountability also includes instituting changes that would make teachers more responsive, both to professional standards and to the general public. Some specific examples of what parents and the public want:

- 82% believe that schools should be required to meet minimum levels of academic achievement for their

PUBLIC EDUCATION SEEN AS WORSE TODAY



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students, measured through statewide, standardized achievement tests.

- While a plurality, 43% to 36% favor giving teachers tenure, 87% would support changes in the tenure system which would make it easier to fire incompetent teachers.

- 67% favor paying higher salaries to attract better teachers, and 76% favor merit pay for teachers based on performance.

- 91% believe that teachers should be required to take competency tests every five years or so to prove they are still qualified to teach.

All of these items deal with accountability. In each instance, the public shows strong support for an increase in the accountability of teachers. The need for accountability may itself be a reflection of the frustration of people with a system that seems only to respond to its own internal imperatives.

Without Accountability, the Option Is Enforced Choice:

Public education enjoys a partial monopoly within a given community. The monopoly is incomplete because parents can exercise choice in where they live, and some parents can afford to choose to send their children to private or parochial schools. Public schools that are less attractive diminish the value of property in a community by reducing the demand for housing by families.

In most instances, school districts do not behave as if they are competing for students. The exceptions are the central city schools, which have in recent years attempted to compete for the more able students by creating specially enriched courses and programs **designed to compete primarily for the middle class.**

The most significant factor that produces accountability in the private sector is the availability of effective economic choice. Producers are accountable to consumers precisely because of the ease of substituting one similar product for another. Competitive choice is the essence of accountability because it forces producers, upon pain of bankruptcy, to meet customer needs and expectations.

The public has only a limited form of competitive choice in education, and even this choice is dramatically restricted for certain segments of the population -- the poor, less well educated, disadvantaged, and minorities. Many of these people have very limited choices of where they live, and little or no access to non-public education.

Even among the middle class the choices are limited. Districting and redistricting within a community limits the effectiveness of choice, and limits the extent to which competition for students will exist.

Where we looked at these issues in our surveys, we found that respondents across the state, and especially in Milwaukee, want an increase in the choices available to them. These respondents believe in competition, and they believe that competition enhances quality and accountability. These issues were approached with a number of general questions. In the most recent survey completed in January 1989, we found:

- 79% of the Wisconsin residents believe that parents should have the right to choose the local schools their children attend.

- An overwhelming majority, 69%, will support this right even when it means sending children to other districts outside the one in which they live.

- At the same time, only 26% feel that parents should have the right to choose their child's teachers.

In the survey of September 1988, the respondents supported the view that competition would improve quality by a margin of 55% to 39%. These Wisconsin parents clearly are supportive of the idea of the right to choose, even when that choice would extend across district boundaries.

In every instance, this support for choice is strongest in those communities which have the least choice -- Milwaukee, the poor, Blacks, etc.

Perhaps one of the greatest ironies of public opinion is that the strongest support for competitive choice is found among those

people who have least benefited from such choice in the economic system.

Vouchers -- the Competitive Choice Alternative:

The purest form of a competitive choice system occurs in a voucher system first proposed by the Nobel Prize winning economist, Dr. Milton Friedman. The idea is simple, and it can be found in some countries already. With the **voucher system**, each child is allocated a certain amount of money to pay for his or her education; this money is in the form of an educational voucher. The schools are not allocated funding; they must receive funding based on their ability to attract and keep students. Schools which could not compete would eventually dissolve. Superior schools would grow and prosper, as businesses do.

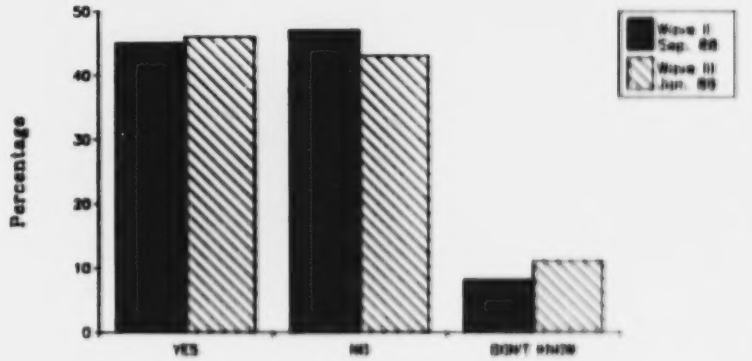
The voucher idea has been discussed for nearly 30 years. During that time, the idea has been attacked by many members of the educational establishment. During the past decade, the idea has been winning greater support, particularly in academic circles. This support may be partially due to the growing frustration of many reformers to achieve the successes they would like in the face of the mounting evidence of the inferiority of American education to that of other industrialized countries.

Our surveys have asked about the voucher system each time, with the question wording changed between the first and second studies to take into account the possibility of wording bias. Across the three surveys of 1000 or more respondents each, support for the voucher system ranged between 45% and 49% throughout the entire state.

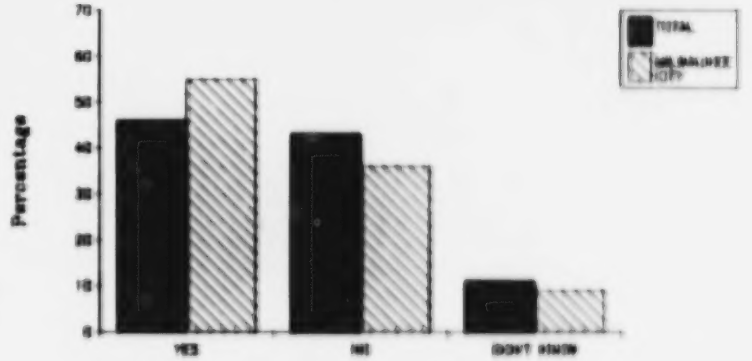
In Milwaukee, however, the support is nearly two to one for the voucher system, where 55% to 60% of the residents favor such a proposal. As one might expect, support is particularly strong among those people with the least choice--the poor, Blacks, the disadvantaged, etc.

The voucher system is probably not yet an idea whose time has arrived. Opposition to competitive choice remains strong within the educational establishment, and support is strong only in Milwaukee. In the rest of the state, the public is more or less evenly divided, with the least support found consistently in the Madison area.

LIKE TO SEE THE "VOUCHER SYSTEM" ADOPTED IN WISCONSIN



MILWAUKEE WANTS "VOUCHER SYSTEM" FOR SCHOOLS



Madison is the part of the state which is most dependent upon education for its livelihood, and it has the highest percentage of adults employed in education.

These data provide a pattern of answers that are generally quite definitive concerning the desires of the public for education:

- The public would like accountability for education -- adherence to standards of competency and financial remunerations based on performance.

- Given the option, the public would choose changes in the educational system that enhance the parents' opportunities for choice.

- Although support across the state is mixed for a voucher system of education, support is very strong within Milwaukee, where residents support overwhelmingly every option that enhances their choices.

Despite these desires, the current system of education guarantees very little other than mediocrity. Public schools today do not have to compete, with the exception of some efforts by the Milwaukee city schools. The parents can do one of two things: they put their children in private or parochial schools, or they move into the best school system they can afford. The poor have very few choices, and the educational establishment has opposed nearly every proposal to increase significantly the choices available to the poor.

Where choice has been provided, it has not been successful, as with the Chapter 220 Program. This program is very costly, and the cost diminishes public support. Today, 50% of the residents oppose this program, and opposition increases to 70% when the respondents are told the real cost of the program. Also, 71% oppose paying bonuses to the Milwaukee suburbs who take these students.

IV. WHAT DO WE WANT OUR SCHOOLS TO DO

In an earlier section we displayed data that showed strongly that Wisconsin residents want an educational system that educates each child to his fullest potential, not a system which tries to educate each child up to some minimal standard.

Consistent with this view is overwhelming support for programs aimed at the learning disabled and programs aimed at the gifted:

- 96% support enriched educational opportunities and training for the learning disabled.

- 80% believe that we need programs designed specifically for gifted children.

Both of these types of programs are, of course, designed for special populations, where the absence of such special attention might diminish the opportunities for the group in question.

A broader issue before education today is, however, the role of the educational system in a world in which both parents are employed full time outside of the household. In many places across the country, and particularly among private schools, the school has been a caretaker for the children of working parents, both before and after school.
Wisconsin residents have mixed feelings about such programs:

- 47% would approve of schools providing child care before school opens.

- 49% approve of schools providing after school care.

- Only 34% approve of the schools providing care during the summer months.

The pattern of support and opposition is quite well defined. Support is much stronger among Blacks, Milwaukee residents, younger people, and women. The opposition is greatest among the elderly.

Whether we like it or not, the pattern of American family life, and the changes in the family, dictate an increasing dependence on some form of child care for many families with children. If the schools are to provide such care, 85% of the respondents believe that the parents, and not the taxpayers, should fund this care.

The schools have many inherent advantages in assuming this role for parents. First, the children are already at the facility, reducing transportation costs. Second, the physical facilities are already available with some modifications. Third, the parents have greater

confidence in the public schools than they do in most private child care centers.

These advantages can be easily outweighed by the imposition of a cost structure of wages that make the schools quickly non-competitive with other facilities. Whatever we decide, the issue of quality child care is an issue which will continue to concern us in the decade ahead.

V. WHO WILL PAY AND HOW

Human beings often seem to have an inherent desire to receive something for nothing when it comes to public policy. Improving the public schools in Wisconsin may or may not cost more money. Public institutions always seem to have an ability to justify spending more money for a particular program, and that is to be expected as well.

The public in Wisconsin has mixed feelings about spending more money for education in Wisconsin. On the one hand, they will favor spending money where real improvements would occur. On the other hand, they are suspicious about the money that is currently being spent, and they provide only limited support for increased taxes.

This pattern of ambivalence is present in all three surveys, and some of the results include the following:

- In the first survey, 33% of the residents felt we spend too little on the public schools compared with 20% who feel we spend too much. Finally, 40% feel the amount is about right.

- Overall, 26% feel we spend too little on colleges and universities, with 19% who feel we spend too much.

Support for additional spending on the public schools is stronger in Milwaukee than in the rest of the state. On another question, however, 51% said that they would **oppose** higher taxes to support public education in their community. In the second survey, six months later, the respondents showed little change with 47% opposing higher taxes in their communities.

On a different question in the same survey, however, 55% stated that they would be willing to pay higher taxes to provide additional

support for the public schools. Support was much less for colleges and universities, where only 41% would be willing to raise their taxes for these institutions.

Conversely, 75% do not think that state support for the public schools could be reduced, and 57% do not think state support for the colleges could be reduced.

Thus, the data present a conflicting pattern where support for education is almost evenly divided. The support for more money is greatest in Milwaukee, but even Milwaukee residents have serious misgivings about increasing their own taxes to support the public schools.

Six months later, however, support for higher taxes dropped sharply. In January of 1989, only 40% of the respondents favored higher taxes to support public education in their community.

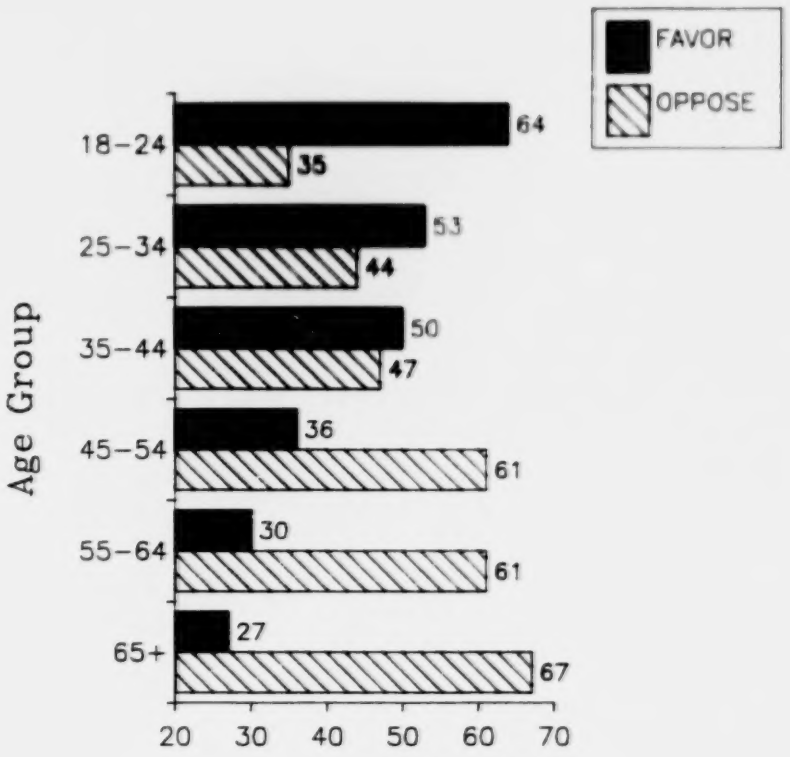
Shifting School Taxes to the State:

The public schools in Wisconsin are supported primarily from the local property taxes. One proposal is to shift these revenues to the state through increases in the sales and income taxes, with corresponding decreases in local property taxes. If the voters were given a choice, they would support such a shift:

- 58% of the respondents would shift the taxes, with only 33% who would retain the property taxes at current levels.
- This support for shifting taxes occurs in spite of the realization by 75% of the respondents that control over education would shift toward the state as well.
- Even if control were to shift, most respondents feel that the quality of education would stay the same, with virtually equal numbers feeling that quality would improve and get worse.

As in earlier examples, Milwaukee is distinctly different from the rest of the state. Milwaukee is much more strongly in favor of shifting taxes to the state government, and less fearful of the consequences.

OLDER RESIDENTS OPPOSE HIGHER TAXES FOR EDUCATION



Some Observations of Who Should Pay:

The public always seems to want someone else to pay. At the same time, they are willing to tax themselves if the cause is worthwhile, and they are willing to support additional revenues where the logic of a program is clear.

Public education is important to the residents of Wisconsin. They do not want their educational system diminished by financial cuts. On the whole, they feel that public education has enough funds, except for Milwaukee where considerable dissatisfaction exists concerning resources. If there is a pressing need in education, the public would support increases in revenues and probably even increased taxes.

The chief problem with the pattern of support for educational funding is that support decreases with the age of the respondents. Older respondents, those most likely to vote and participate politically, are far more opposed to any increase in taxes or revenues for education. These older residents count, and they are the primary cause for defeat of many school budgets around the United States.

VI. A SUMMARY WITH SOME CONCLUSIONS

Wisconsin residents throughout the state (with the possible exception of Madison) are very uneasy about the quality of their educational systems. The three surveys of more than 3000 residents capture a view of the public concerning education, and that view has many negative qualities. With the exception of Milwaukee, where residents are quite dissatisfied with their educational system, the residents across the state are "lukewarm" toward the education that is provided.

If they had a choice, the residents would support very strongly more accountability in all areas of the state, and more choice for the residents of Milwaukee. At the present time, there is very little evidence that the residents will get the kind of education for their children they desire.

The problem with our educational system is that we lack a ready mechanism like the "loss of market share" to motivate producers. Educators exist in a world in which they generally control their

market, regardless of the quality of the product they produce. Given this circumstance, it is not surprising that mediocrity is the most common standard we seem to accept in considering our educational system.

Public education is still taught largely the way it was a 100 years ago. Despite the remarkable efficiencies and improved productivity that might be possible with the merger of television, computers, programmed learning, interactive video systems, cable, and others, we still insist on teaching the way it was done before all of these technical developments had taken place.

Our colleges and universities, likewise, continue to teach in a manner remarkably similar to the Middle Ages. It is almost as if technological innovation had no application in higher education, despite the fact the tuitions have increased in private colleges and universities by a factor of 10 to 15 times in the past 30 years.

Can we afford to continue this way? Can we continue to afford mediocrity? Can we afford to ignore the technology of teaching and learning? Can we afford to avoid examining the basic organization and structure of our educational system?

The failure of our educational system is like a slowly progressive disease. It probably will have to cause enormous damage to our ability to compete internationally before we will commit to serious improvements on our competitive position. The educational establishment is a powerful force to retard change. It is always difficult to get the people in charge to take a careful look at themselves. Moreover, many aspects of the structural governance of our educational system are designed to restrict the influence of the public on policy. Education was, after all, at one time thought to be too important to allow the public to influence it.

The purpose of the surveys is to stimulate a dialogue within the state on important and pressing public issues. Our objective is to explore what people think, what they want, and what they expect. By providing such information, we hope to promote a debate--not over our methods as much as our content. We, more than most--understand that the public is not always right; and that majority opinion can sometimes err as substantially as a single person. At the same time, Wisconsin residents **are the consumers of public education;** and they are also the people who will

ultimately pay the bill. Elected public officials, in particular, will ignore such realities only at some risk.

The research produced some rather negative feelings about public education in Wisconsin, particularly in Milwaukee. The Milwaukee problem is, in fact, a crisis of confidence; and real erosion of the system will occur unless that confidence is restored. The issue here is not our research, but how officials will respond to the research.

ABOUT THE INSTITUTE

The Wisconsin Policy Research Institute is a not-for-profit institute established to study public policy issues affecting the state of Wisconsin.

Under the new federalism, government policy increasingly is made at the state and local level. These public policy decisions affect the lives of every citizen in the state of Wisconsin. Our goal is to provide nonpartisan research on key issues that affect citizens living in Wisconsin so that their elected representatives are able to make informed decisions to improve the quality of life and future of the State.

Our major priority is to improve the accountability of Wisconsin's government. State and local government must be responsive to the citizens of Wisconsin in terms of the programs they devise and the tax money they spend. Accountability should be made available in every major area to which Wisconsin devotes the public's funds.

The agenda for the Institute's activities will direct attention and resources to study the following issues: education; welfare and social services; criminal justice; taxes and spending; and economic development.

We believe that the views of the citizens of Wisconsin should guide the decisions of government officials. To help accomplish this, we will conduct semi-annual public opinion polls that are structured to enable the citizens of Wisconsin to inform government officials about how they view major statewide issues. These polls will be disseminated through the media and be made available to the general public and to the legislative and executive branches of State government. It is essential that elected officials remember that all the programs established and all the money spent comes from the citizens of the State of Wisconsin and is made available through their taxes. Public policy should reflect the real needs and concerns of all the citizens of Wisconsin and not those of specific special interest groups.